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[The editor-in-chief comments:]

Dr. Brophy, quite apart from the specific examples he cites, raises very important ethical issues regarding the myriad of material sent to physicians in the name of continuing medical education. However accurate the information in documents that they prepare and distribute, is it appropriate for the publisher to withhold from readers the name of the sponsoring organization, be it commercial or nonprofit? Also, should readers know the circumstances under which the material was selected and prepared?

In Brophy's example, the material was a report of presentations given by physicians. Was the report checked for accuracy by the physicians before publication? Did anyone other than the person giving the presentation and the reporter have a hand in selecting the topics to be reported or the slant to be given in the report? Who paid the publishing house to prepare and distribute the material free of charge to physicians?

All published material supported by advertising dollars or a commercial firm is susceptible to the perception that it may be biased to reflect the sponsoring firm's interest. Responsible publications attempt to minimize that possibility by clearly explaining to readers not only how the material was selected and prepared, but also who paid for it to be published. Failure to

do so opens the publisher, rightly or wrongly, to the allegation that he who paid the piper did call the tune. Indeed, failure to indicate who paid for the publication can suggest to more suspicious readers that they were being deliberately misled.

The specific material to which Brophy refers is irrelevant. More important is whether readers know who really shaped the purported educational material and what changes in practice behaviour were really being sought. Caveat emptor!

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Editor-in-chief

CONTROVERSY OVER USE OF PREGNANT MARE'S URINE

In the article "Canada's huge pregnant-mare-urine industry faces growing pressure from animal-rights lobby" (*Can Med Assoc J* 1994; 151: 1009-1012), by Lynne Sears Williams, animal rights activists are very careful to stake out the moral high ground while they attack the Premarin (conjugated estrogens) industry. However, if one listens carefully to what they say, one realizes that they have no claim to this territory.

A national director of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), the organization discussed in the article, has been quoted as saying that "a rat is a pig is a dog is a boy," that "six million people died in concentration camps, but six billion broiler chickens will die this year in slaughterhouses" and that "mankind is the biggest blight on the face of the earth."¹ I doubt that many reasonable people share these views.

It is time that animal-rights activists were recognized as vicious misanthropes and their yammerings ignored.

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Reference

1. Marquardt K: *Animal Scam: the Beastly Abuse of Human Rights*, Regnery Gateway, Washington, 1993: 175, 176

As the wife of a physician and the owner of several horses, I have long been concerned about the pregnant-mare-urine (PMU) farms operating in our province. It was with great interest that my husband and I read the article in *CMAJ* justifying the presence of the PMU industry to the medical profession. If more physicians were aware of what happens to the by-product of this industry (namely the foals produced), they would be more hesitant to prescribe Premarin.

Although I consider myself an animal lover, I agree that if the death of an animal will save the life of a person, we must consider the human life the one to preserve. In this case, it has not been proven that human lives would be lost without the use of Premarin, and a synthetic equivalent is available. However, by involving the agriculture industry in the production of the equine version of these hormones, the excellent financial reports from PMU farmers make government officials and private industry look good because they are "working together" for the economic benefit of the farmers.

How Wyeth-Ayerst Canada Inc., which is making huge profits, can state that it is not responsible for the by-product of PMU operations (the foals) is beyond me. We require other industries such as the pulp-and-paper and petroleum industries to be responsible for the by-products they produce. In this case, leaving the farmer to dispose of, on average, 100 foals per farm per year results in inhumane treatment. With 500 PMU operations in North America 50 000 or more unwanted foals must be disposed of each year. A farmer living hundreds of miles from a slaughterhouse is not going to pay for transportation. Just look at a newborn foal — you will see very little meat to

harvest and therefore very little money to be made. It does not take a rocket scientist to imagine a farmer's choices in ensuring that his profits are not used up to care for the offspring of the mares.

Europeans, who were up in arms over the slaughter of a few thousand baby seals each year, will certainly see reason to protest and to boycott Premarin once word of the dark side of this industry gets out.

There is hope, now that the animal-rights organization PETA is taking on PMU farming. A giant company such as Wyeth-Ayerst is a tough one to fight; it has unlimited funds to promote only the best side of this industry. However, as people like me point out the facts to physicians prescribing this drug, and to women taking it, the financial effect of a decrease in sales of Premarin will ensure the demise of this industry. Several obstetricians and gynecologists in the Calgary area have told me that they no longer prescribe Premarin to their patients after hearing details about how it is produced.

Members of the public, reporters and members of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals have tried to gain access to the barns where these horses are kept. The only reports we have about the superior care these animals receive are from spokespersons hired by the company. Drive by any of these operations and you will see huge No Trespassing signs and high fences — nothing like the tranquil picture of a couple of horses lounging on a lush green pasture that accompanied the article in *CMAJ*. I have seen dreary, dry paddocks crowded with miserable-looking horses.

I hope that more physicians consider where and how the drugs they prescribe are being produced, rather than being influenced by the propaganda of the companies selling the products.

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In the special report on the PMU industry, Dr. Aldo Baumgartner, chairman and chief executive officer of Wyeth-Ayerst Canada Inc., is quoted as saying that "the allegations of inhumane treatment of animals are completely unfounded." However, Wyeth-Ayerst does not deny the fact that horses are impregnated and confined for months to collect the urine used to make Premarin, nor does it deny that slaughter awaits their offspring. We and countless others feel that such practices are abusive.

The *Recommended Code of Practice for the Care and Handling of Horses in PMU Operations* does not lay down "strict guidelines." It is only a recommendation by the Manitoba Ministry of Agriculture, and it was developed only after intense pressure was brought to bear by animal welfare organizations. It does not adequately address the issues of exercise and nutritional diseases. Many mares become "stiff-legged," a benign-sounding term used by PMU farmers to describe lameness, a serious condition resulting from many months of confinement.

The sad by-products of the PMU industry are the more than 50 000 foals that are sent to slaughterhouses. Wyeth-Ayerst skilfully distances itself from any responsibility for this by-product. In letters to consumers, Wyeth-Ayerst euphemistically refers to the fate of the foals in terms of "overseas markets." Baumgartner states, "This is not something with which we get directly involved." The Premarin market was \$642 million in 1992 and accounted for 14% of the \$4.5 billion revenue of Wyeth-Ayerst. Considering its control of 60% to 70% of the US estrogen market, Wyeth-Ayerst must take the responsibility for the by-products of Premarin production.

Baumgartner states that Premarin contains 10 known estrogens whereas there are four estrogens in synthetic products. He fails to mention that more than 40% of the estrogen in Premarin is not human estrogen but

specific horse estrogens, which are found in concentrations many times higher than human estrogens.^{1,2} There is evidence that the value of conjugated estrogens is limited by the first-pass hepatic effect.^{3,4}

The claim that Premarin's link to endometrial cancer has been "largely dismissed" is false. Most of the literature continues to suggest that there is a 207% increased risk of endometrial cancer in 4 to 24 out of 1000 women treated when progesterone is not added to estrogen-replacement therapy.^{1,2,5-7}

Baumgartner and Dr. Dave Hanley state that synthetic estrogens cannot be substituted for Premarin. Studies of synthetic estrogens have compared these drugs favourably to Premarin in terms of the risk of cardiovascular disease,⁸⁻¹¹ the maintenance of estrogen levels,¹²⁻¹⁵ the risk of osteoporosis¹⁶⁻¹⁸ and the risk of breast cancer.¹⁹⁻²¹ Patients have even demonstrated a preference for synthetic-estrogen therapy.³

Baumgartner claims that "it's very dangerous for the PETA people to tell doctors what to prescribe." PETA has not and never will suggest to physicians which medications to prescribe or to their patients which drugs to take. We have attempted to alert physicians and patients to the abuse of horses in the production of Premarin. It is our opinion that continuation of the production of unnatural estrogen made from horse urine, when more natural "synthetic" human estrogens are available, is archaic and unnecessary.

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